

Auburn Journal

Auburn wildfire safety sparks funding boost from Sierra Nevada Conservancy

Auburn Fire to administer a grant to clear shaded fire breaks on American River canyon rim

By Gus Thomson, Journal Staff Writer 6/10/12



c Gus Thomson/Journal file photo

AUBURN CA - Community-based efforts to keep Auburn safe from wildfires spreading from the American River canyon have received a major financial boost.

The Auburn-based Sierra Nevada Conservancy board has approved a grant to provide \$147,690 in funding for a project that will clear 60 acres of wildfire-safe defensible space this year along the canyon rim to the east of Auburn.

The work will mainly be done by California Department of Corrections inmate crews, with a private vendor coming in to chip cuttings.

Auburn Mayor Kevin Hanley credited Auburn Fire Chief Mark D'Ambogi with shepherding the grant application to success.

Hanley, one of the main proponents in having the Sierra Nevada Conservancy headquarters in Auburn, said he's looking forward to work starting this September on knocking down overgrowth along 60 acres of American River canyon rim land.

"He did a wonderful job and it's going to be a big boost," Hanley said.

D'Ambogi has worked consistently to identify and apply for several grants to aid Auburn efforts to protect the community from wildfire and his 90-page application indicated the level of effort that Auburn Fire is going to do in an attempt to protect the city, Hanley said.

D'Ambrogi said that a start on work will be dependent on how long the fire season lasts and the availability of inmate crews, whose priorities lie with fighting fires.

The project will be on U.S. Bureau of Reclamation land between Portland Avenue, near Overlook Park, and Robie Point. Pathways, including the Western States Trail, will be kept open during the work period, D'Ambrogi said.

"It's one of the most difficult areas to get at," D'Ambrogi said. "We've done an excellent job on private properties. People have really chipped in but being on public lands, this one is a little different. We wanted to concentrate on a high priority area for the grant."

Last week's Sierra Nevada Conservancy board decision provides funding for a better line of defense next year from fires that start in the canyon, Hanley said.

"We're going to try to fill in the gap," Hanley said. "We'll really have a good line of defense. We're going to do everything we can."

Auburn's grant was part of \$4.6 million in awards for work to restore Sierra Nevada forests to ecological health and prevent damaging forest fires. The funding is from Proposition 84, passed by California voters in 2006.

Also in the Auburn area, a \$300,000 grant was approved for Placer Land trust forest management efforts on the Harvego Bear River Preserve, near the Auburn Valley Golf and Country Club.

Conservancy Executive Officer Jim Branham said that many of the Sierra Nevada's forests are in such poor ecological health that, in many instances, they are at high risk of being overrun by catastrophic wildfire.

"These projects will go a long way toward reducing that threat and protecting our watersheds, as called for under Prop. 84 guidelines."

For this grant round, the conservancy received nearly 200 initial requests. Due to funding constraints, 25 projects were approved by the board at a meeting in Inyo County.